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Examining the Online Expression of Ideology among Far-Right Extremist Forum Users

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, there has been an increased focus among researchers on the role of the Internet among actors and groups across the political and ideological spectrum. There has been particular emphasis on the ways that far-right extremists utilize forums and social media to express ideological beliefs through sites affiliated with real-world extremist groups and unaffiliated websites. The majority of research has used qualitative assessments or quantitative analyses of keywords to assess the extent of specific messages. Few have considered the breadth of extremist ideologies expressed among participants so as to quantify the proportion of beliefs espoused by participants. This study addressed this gap in the literature through a content analysis of over 18,000 posts from eight far-right extremist forums operating online. The findings demonstrated that the most prevalent ideological sentiments expressed in users' posts involved anti-minority comments, though they represent a small proportion of all posts made in the sample. Additionally, users expressed associations to far-right extremist ideologies through their usernames, signatures, and images associated with their accounts. The implications of this analysis for policy and practice to disrupt extremist movements were discussed in detail.

Over the past decade, there has been an increased research focus on the ways that individuals come to accept ideological beliefs among both jihadist and far-right actors.[1] These studies demonstrate that individuals may be more susceptible to messaging and idea exposure during certain key points in their life-course.[2] These messages are typically presented via social connections in the real world, but evidence increasingly demonstrates that on-line communications are a pivotal resource to expose individuals to radical ideas and recruit them to violence.[3]

Online communities, whether operating via forums, social media, or other messaging platforms, are a particularly vital resource among radical and extremist movements because they enable individuals to spread propaganda supporting their ideology to individuals who may be outside of their physical reach.[4] Additionally, online spaces provide points of social connection that can serve as key points to facilitate the acceptance of extremist beliefs via on and off-line relationships.[5] For instance, recent research has

focused on the role of Twitter and social media as a tool for jihadists to recruit youth.[6] In addition, far-right groups in the U.S. have long used the Internet as a messaging tool.[7]

While research and public policy have extensively focused on foreign terror groups, particularly among jihadists,[8] domestic far-right groups in the U.S. pose as a potentially greater threat to U.S. national security. Evidence suggests acts of violence are more likely to be performed by domestic attackers aligned with far-right ideologies.[9] In fact, a national survey of law enforcement intelligence officials concluded that state police agencies are as concerned about attacks by far-right extremists, such as Neo-Nazis, skinheads, as they are about the Jihadist threat.[10]

One of the inherent challenges in combatting far-right extremism lies in the absence of a single unifying ideological agenda that links groups together. Multiple underlying belief systems have been observed among far-right actors, including anti-government, anti-globalist groups, anti-immigrant, sovereign citizen movements, paramilitary groups, neo-Nazis, Odinists, and race-based ideological groups.[11] Though there are distinctions in the interests of each movement, they share some commonalities with respect to ideas about threats to liberty, American sovereignty, and in certain cases which groups are marginalized within a society.

Researchers have recently attempted to quantify the extent to which ideologies are expressed by these groups and any potential association between their agendas. These studies are promising, though they are based on data developed from various sources regarding mostly real-world activities.[12] Research is also needed assessing ideological expression in online communities which have been used historically by far-right extremist groups.[13] Many of these studies utilize linguistic and textual analyses derived from convenience samples of posts from forums, or with an emphasis on identifying only key ideological terms and language.[14]

There is less research considering the extent to which ideological beliefs are communicated in more everyday community-building discussions between participants, such as dating, relationships, child rearing, politics, and other non-ideological concerns.[15] These topics often comprise the bulk of online forum discussions, even among some deviant and criminal communities.[16] As a result, it is vital to document when ideological expressions occur in off-topic discussions to understand the extent to which these sentiments permeate all aspects of communication for far-right extremist communities.

Additionally, few studies consider how these ideas are expressed across online communities whether they are operated by single interest groups and more general, unaffiliated forums. It is possible that participants in forums operated by and for members of real-world extremist groups may be more ideologically expressive at all times compared to communities that operate on the basis of a shared interest in far-right extremist beliefs. Such an issue has yet to be examined in depth using a diverse sample of online forum populations.

To improve our understanding of these issues, this study performed a content analysis of 18,119 total posts made in eight forums operated by or for individuals with an interest in radical far-right ideologies. This analysis utilized a framework originally developed by Kerodoal and associates[17] to examine the proportion of posts that correspond to traditional far-right extremist beliefs. The framework was also altered to include factors more commonly associated with online posting behaviors. The implications of this study for our

knowledge of ideological expression will be considered in depth, along with recommendations for public policy and future research.

Far-right groups' use of the Internet

Far-right extremists have historically used the Internet to further their ideological beliefs and goals.[18] Weimann[19] (770) concluded "in the late 1990s, there were merely a dozen terrorist websites; by 2000, virtually all terrorist groups had established their presence on the Internet and in 2003 there were over 2,600 terrorist websites. The number rose dramatically and by January 2010 the archive contains over 7,600 websites serving terrorists and their supporters." Similarly, Chermak, Freilich and Suttmoeller[20] found that the vast majority of hate groups involved in ideologically motivated violence had an Internet presence. Nearly half of the organizations attempted to recruit individuals to their organization using the Internet. Meddaugh and Kay[21] argued that online forums "provide a 'cyber transition' between traditional hate speech and 'reasonable racism,' a tempered discourse that emphasizes pseudo-rational discussions of race, and subsequently may cast a wider net in attracting audiences".

Far-right extremist groups have not only operated websites but also forums as a means to engage others in direct conversation. Forums provide an asynchronous form of communication where participants can post and reply to others using text, html links, and even images to express themselves. Over time, far-right extremist ideology forums began to operate without any specific affiliation to real-world groups. One of the most prominent examples is Stormfront, which began operation in 1990 as a bulletin board system and transitioned to a website and forum in 1996.

There are still both affiliated and unaffiliated forums and websites in operation, though the diversification of online platforms allows extremists and terrorist organizations to spread propaganda and ideological messages in multiple formats. In particular, far-right extremist groups have used music, video games, and disinformation websites to reach potential audiences.[22] They have also co-opted the use of memes that synthesize pop culture, ideological and political beliefs, and sarcasm together into an image with text to create appealing viral content.[23] Far-right extremist memes have spread across social media sites like Instagram and Gab, as well as forums and threaded communication platforms like Reddit.[24] The development of user-generated video and streaming content channels, such as YouTube and FacebookLive, have also created platforms for the distribution of short and long-form content to espouse individual beliefs and messaging in convincing ways.[25]

The diffusion of platforms, however, means that organizational messaging must compete with that of other groups, creating fierce ideological disagreements between groups.[26] Ideological, personal, and organization issues may be debated publicly, which can cause groups to splinter and dissolve.[27] This is evident in the deletion of user accounts from traditional platforms like Twitter over the expression of ideological messages.[28] Instead of attempting to reenter the platform, some have simply migrated to other platforms like Gab which are thought to be friendly to far-right and extremist content.

In this sort of environment, actors must find ways to demonstrate their specific ideological or subcultural values and highlight their adherence to the movement.[29] The disembodied nature of online communications renders it difficult for participants to

illustrate their association with a movement through common outward physical signs, such as tattoos, clothing, or hairstyles.[30] To that end, far-right extremist groups utilize a unique language, or argot, when communicating online to demonstrate the connection to and belief in various ideologies. For example, 1488 is shorthand to communicate adherence to the fourteen words of Hitler, and reference the eighth letter of the alphabet, h, for Heil Hitler.[31] These phrases illustrate a person's knowledge of the movement, and serve as form of ideological expression to end a post or communication. It is unknown how frequently these more covert forms of ideological expression occur relative to other, more overt ideological statements in online environments.

Ideological beliefs of the American far-right

Given the persistent use of technology among far-right extremists, there is a need to assess the range of ideological beliefs they espouse in online platforms. Research on far-right terror in physical spaces demonstrates the existence of a wide range of ideas,[32] creating what Mudde[33] argued was "an ideology composed of a combination of several different, and intrinsically complex features," "that people are free to fill in as they see fit". In fact, many of these beliefs appear in research on far-right extremists and terrorists in various Western nations.[34] In the absence of a single framework, it is possible to identify commonalities across the range of publicly available definitions and operationalizations from empirical studies of far-right terrorism.[35] This review will specifically focus on the U. S. due to the historical presence of various far-right extremist movements and their increasing prominence over the last five years.[36]

First, many far-right extremist groups believe in conspiracy theories that involve a grave threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty, as well as a belief that their personal and/or national "way of life" is under attack and may be about to end.[37] Examples include beliefs that global entities like the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and foreign powers such as Russia, China or Mexico, are conspiring to create a new global entity called the New World Order. Others focus on international bankers, communists, Free Masons, and other alleged shadowy forces scheming to undermine American sovereignty in favor of rule by foreign forces. Similarly, some argue that Jews are secretly ruling the U.S. for their own interests and the American government is actually the Zionist Occupied Government (ZOG) that must be fought. Religious permutations of these conspiracy beliefs include arguments that the end of time is near and we are approaching the beginning of the apocalypse.

Second, many far-right extremists subscribe to xenophobic beliefs, particularly the idea that there is an infiltration or threat posed by specific ethnic, racial, or religious groups. Sometimes the threat is labeled as all foreign persons or non-native born persons in the U.S. Others point to racial minorities like African Americans, ethnic minorities like Asians or Latinos, or religious minorities like Jews or Muslims.[38] Some segments of the far-right, in other words, are racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic, or anti-immigrant generally. Sometimes these racist beliefs are couched in scientific terms as seen in the racist screeds by the academic Kevin McDonald. Others are couched religiously as seen in religions like Odinism or the World Church of the Creator, among others. Christian Identity adherents, for example, believe that the Biblical story of Adam and Eve includes the Devil who took the form of the snake to seduce Eve. Adherents of this view therefore believe that all Jews

are actually the descendants of this union, and are literally not human and emanate from Satan, while nonwhite races are seen as mud people. These beliefs provide a theological justification for their broader bigotry and racism. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have documented the extensive racism among some segments of the far-right. For instance, an analysis of far-right ideologically motivated homicide incidents in the ECDB (n = 214) finds that over 70% were motivated by anti-minority sentiments.[39]

Third, in addition to and complementing their anti-global beliefs, far-right extremists often endorse anti-government beliefs. These views are tied in with other ideological agendas, as the notion that the government has already been taken over by foreign forces or is colluding with internal enemies like Jews, African Americans and/or other minorities necessitates violence as the government is acting to enslave the general (white) population.[40] Others are particularly concerned about attempts to undermine individual liberties and to stray from literal interpretations of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. As a result of these beliefs, some far-right extremists have purposefully targeted police and other American government officials. For instance, over 15% of far-right ideologically motivated fatal attacks, according to the ECDB, were committed to further anti-government beliefs.[41]

Fourth, far-right extremists are especially reverent of individual liberty and to be free of taxes. It is common for far-right extremists to argue that the sixteenth Amendment is illegitimate and that paying taxes is voluntary. Other arguments include that the IRS is actually a private corporation that lacks governing authority, wages and tips are not income and thus are not taxable, native-born citizens are exempt from taxation, or only foreign income is taxable.[42]

Two additional beliefs focus on concerns related to personal liberty and survival. Far-right extremists' belief in individual liberty also embraces an unrestricted right to own guns.[43] They often argue that the American Revolution succeeded because the population had access to firearms. Guns are essential to protect personal liberty from both enemy foreign forces, highlighted above, as well as any dictatorial government that may emerge within the existing governmental system. In this respect, guns are the foundation of both individual liberty and American sovereignty.[44] Additionally, far-right extremists also often maintain the need to be prepared for an attack by participating in paramilitary preparations, training and survivalism generally. Accordingly, many stockpile medical supplies, guns, food, and other necessities.[45]

These views provide a basic framework to understand far-right ideologies and how they may be expressed. Researchers have applied these frameworks to extremists and terrorists using data collected that is based on off-line behavior.[46] There is far less research examining this issue using online data, as most studies utilize linguistic and textual analyses to consider the rhetoric of online communications by far-right extremists toward specific issues, such as racial or ethnic animus.[47] Little empirical research has documented the quantities and extent of ideological messaging within each post made by online forum participants, the presence of such content on group-affiliated and independent forums, and the ways in which this might differ from off-line analyses.

Understanding this issue is essential in light of the importance of online communications in the spread of extremist ideologies and organization of far-right extremist groups. Assessing the proportion of language espousing ideological beliefs within and across online spaces can identify the ways that beliefs are communicated and normalized by

participants. Any differences that may be observed in the expression of beliefs across violent and nonviolent groups may also highlight the potential influence of online messaging to physical spaces. In addition, determining the extent to which specific beliefs are expressed can demonstrate how important these ideas are in the overall far-right extremist community. To address these issues, this study explored the ideological elements emphasized within a series of posts made in eight different forums operated by either far-right extremist groups or associated with these movements.

Data and methods

The data for this analysis consisted of a set of 18,120 posts from eight web forums operating on-line by and for individuals with an interest in extreme far-right ideologies in the United States and other nations. Web forums are a form of computer-mediated communication that allows individuals to connect and discuss their resources and needs.[48] Forums are composed of threads, which begin when an individual creates a post where they describe a product or service, ask a question, give an opinion, or simply share past experiences. Others respond to the initial post with their own posts to create a thread that is a running conversation or dialogue. Thus, threads are composed of posts that center on a specific topic under a forum's general heading. Since posters respond to other users, these exchanges in the threads of a forum may "resemble a kind of marathon-focused discussion group."[49]

The sample of forums was developed on the basis of their population size and ties to real-world groups. Forums with both large and small user populations were selected to represent the range of forums currently operating on-line. Additionally, established forums with years of content were selected to reflect participants' persistence within the movement generally. To that end, this sample reflects posts made from 2001 to 2016, respectively, though there was some variation in the longevity of the sites sampled (see Table 1 for forum descriptives). Similarly, a sample of forums was developed that included ties to real-world groups, as well as others that were ideologically expressive, but unaffiliated with any one organization. Five forums had names that were the same as prominent national or international groups that have physical meetings off-line and stated they were operated by these groups. Three forums had no specific group link but whose names or keywords were linked to far-right extremist ideologies. These forums were included to compare the presence or absence of expression of ideological ideas on the basis of ties to a real-world group (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on forums and sample.

Forum	Group Affiliation	Total Subforums	Posts	Timeframe
1	Yes	4	583	2008–2015
2	Yes	5	7603	2001–2016
3	Yes	3	1437	2005–2015
4	No	1	2999	2002–2016
5	No	1	769	2010–2015
6	Yes	2	3199	2010–2015
7	Yes	3	1262	2001–2016
8	No	1	268	2011–2015
Total		20	18,120	

All forums included in this sample also had a primarily U.S.-based user population so as to provide a specific focus on actors within this country. In fact, those with real-world group affiliations were selected because the majority of their members appeared to operate within the U.S. relative to other Western nations. These groups also specifically espoused or were linked to certain belief systems by advocacy watch-groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center. All have been linked to anti-immigrant, and generally racist sentiment, while four of the five had neo-Nazi beliefs. Three also had anti-Semitic beliefs, while two were anti-Catholic. All three of the non-group-affiliated sites noted their white nationalist ideological focus in either their site name or in their site description. The names of the forums and those of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms to provide a modicum of privacy for online identities.[50]

This sample also included multiple subforums whenever possible from each site sampled. Subforums are specialized sections within a given forum that focus on a specific topic of interest, such as humor, technology, or science. This study specifically oversampled on subforums related to technology, gender, or general interest content so as to understand the extent to which ideological expression is present in posts that may not have a direct link to an ideological agenda. The use of a diverse sample enabled researchers to understand the degree to which ideological beliefs are promoted at all times by participants, even when discussing issues that are potentially removed from ideological concerns.

To create the data sets, all threads from each subforum were saved as html files for analysis. The content of each post was then read and coded by hand to determine the extent to which ideological messaging was present in each post in keeping with other forum analyses in the cybercrime literature.[51] As a result, this study's unit of analysis is the content of each post, not the posters, so as to assess its content, rather than the users' evolution over time.

Coding schema

We used content analysis techniques to code each post's content to quantify the appearance of key terms, phrases, and imagery using Kerodoal, Freilich, and Chermak's[52] far-right extremist ideology typology. Their study used data from the ECDB, which provided data points on various aspects of the real-world actions and expressive behaviors of far-right extremists. Since the current study uses online data, it precludes the use of certain variables identified by Kerodoal and colleagues.[53] As a result, certain concepts were refined to more accurately assess online behaviors relative to offline activities.

Conspiratorial posts were coded (0 = no, 1 = yes) based on the use of comments that detail or reference a known far-right conspiracy, such as ZOG or the one-world government. Xenophobic posts (0 = no, 1 = yes) were coded when a post included racist or xenophobic language regarding an outgroup or immigrant group generally. Additionally, the content of each post was coded (0 = no, 1 = yes) for language targeting seven key ethnic or religious groups typically targeted by far-right groups: (1) Anti-LGBTQ; (2) Anti-Latino; (3) Anti-African American; (4) Anti-Immigrant; (5) Anti-Jewish; (6) Anti-Catholic; and (7) Anti-Islamic posts.

Anti-Government posts (0 = no, 1 = yes) were coded based on the poster's use of language that was oppositional to the U.S. government, or attempts to delegitimize its rule. Anti-Tax posts (0 = no, 1 = yes) were identified when the user indicated they did not have to pay taxes or referenced an association to sovereign citizen movement groups generally.

Survivalist posts (0 = no, 1 = yes) were coded on the presence of comments related to an impending apocalypse or "prepper" mentality, such as the need to stockpile food, gold, or other materials for an upcoming catastrophe.

Anti-Gun Control posts (0 = no, 1 = yes) were coded on the basis of language suggesting that gun control laws are unnecessary, or impugn regulations imposed by the government. Posts involving participation in an event (0 = no, 1 = yes) were coded to assess any instance where a user suggested they were in attendance at a rally, protest, or other real-world event associated with far-right groups.

Additional variables were created to measure unique online behaviors that were expressive of far-right ideologies. First, posts were coded for the presence of movement-related signatures or imagery (0 = no, 1 = yes), such as the appearance of an Iron Cross or swastika image within their post. Additionally, if the user ended each post with a "signature line" evocative of far-right beliefs, such as "1488,"[54] or quotes from Adolph Hitler. Individuals who made a specific claim within a post that they belonged to a named extremist, radical, or other far-right group in the real world, were also noted (*self-claim*; 0 = no, 1 = yes). Lastly, the use of movement-related usernames were noted (0 = no, 1 = yes) to capture the use of names as a reflection of adherence to ideological beliefs.[55] For instance, a username that evoked Nazi history or used German-language words like panzer was coded as yes because of the user's attempt to connect their online identity to that of known far-right extremist ideological beliefs.

Findings

To assess the nature and frequency of ideological posting behaviors among users in far-right forums, this analysis proceeds in two stages. First, the proportion of posts that fall into each of the categories of the Kerodoal et al.[56] framework is presented, along with expanded measures to account for the nature of online forums generally. Quotes from the data set are presented where appropriate to demonstrate the tenor of comments. The language is taken directly from each post exactly as it appeared, including all spelling errors and abbreviations. Second, a series of additive scales are presented to assess the utility of the Kerodoal analysis framework with online content. Additionally, a small number of posts were missing data due to the content being saved in a way that did not retrieve the image content after being downloaded or were rendered unreadable in some way. Thus, the number of posts containing content relevant to each category, along with the total number of posts observed is presented in Table 2 for reader clarity. Appropriate statistical tests were used to identify significant differences between the scales on the basis of whether posters participated in group affiliated or independently operated forums.

The use of ideological content in forum posts

Within this sample, there were a relatively small proportion of posts related to specific conspiracy theories, or conspiratorial notions as a whole. Only 3.15% of all posts (n = 482) involved such language with many espousing relatively common conspiracies, such as anti-vaccination ideas and anti-climate change sentiment. For instance, a poster complained that climate change science was completely fake, writing:

Table 2. Presentations of ideological content within the full forum sample.

Ideological Sentiment	# of Posts With Content	Total # of Posts	Percent
Conspiratorial	482	18,113	2.7
Xenophobic	1803	18,111	10
Anti-LGBTQ	270	18,119	1.5
Anti-Latino	332	18,119	1.8
Anti-African American	2221	18,118	12.3
Anti-Immigrant	344	18,117	1.9
Anti-Jewish	1024	18,118	5.7
Anti-Catholic	21	18,119	0.1
Anti-Islamic	345	18,117	1.9
Anti-Government	324	18,112	1.8
Anti-Tax	11	18,113	0.1
Survivalist	61	18,111	0.3
Anti-Gun Control	52	18,112	0.3
Participation	361	18,112	2.0
Self-Claim	367	18,112	2.0
Movement-Related Signatures/Image	12,791	17,861	71.6
Movement-Related Username	8482	18,113	46.8

Table 3. Ideological expression by category.

	1	2	3	4
Scale	7 Item	9 Item	7 Item	14 Item
0	15,057 (83.2%)	727 (4.1%)	14,148 (78.1%)	12,602 (69.6%)
1	2688 (14.8%)	10,789 (60.4%)	3473 (19.2%)	3621 (20.0%)
2	319 (1.8%)	5474 (30.7%)	411 (2.3%)	1409 (7.8%)
3	34 (0.2%)	751 (4.2%)	66 (0.4%)	345 (1.9%)
4	5 (0.0%)	99 (0.6%)	11 (0.1%)	91 (0.5%)
5	1 (0.0%)	9 (0.1%)	2 (0.0%)	22 (0.1%)
6	0 (0.0%)	3 (0.0%)	1 (0.0%)	8 (0.0%)
7	1 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
8	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
9	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.0%)
Total	18,105 (100%)	17,853 (100%)	18,113 (100%)	18,099 (100)

Table 4. Ideological expression by category by group affiliation of forum.

	1		2		3		4	
	7 Item		9 Item		7 Item		14 Item	
Scale	Non-Group	Group	Non-Group	Group	Non-Group	Group	Non-Group	Group
0	3355 (22.3%)	11,702 (77.7%)	60 (8.3%)	667 (91.7%)	3719 (26.3%)	10,429 (73.7%)	3324 (25.7%)	9368 (74.3%)
1	603 (22.4%)	2085 (77.6%)	2666 (24.7%)	8123 (75.3%)	278 (8.0%)	3196 (92.0%)	541 (14.9%)	3080 (85.1%)
2	66 (20.7%)	253 (79.3%)	1156 (21.1%)	4318 (78.9%)	31 (7.5%)	380 (92.5%)	207 (14.7%)	1202 (85.3%)
3	10 (29.4%)	24 (70.6%)	109 (14.5%)	642 (85.5%)	3 (4.5%)	63 (95.5%)	36 (10.4%)	309 (89.6%)
4	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	15 (15.2%)	84 (84.8%)	1 (9.1%)	10 (90.9%)	8 (8.8%)	83 (91.2%)
5	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	1 (11.1%)	8 (89.9%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	2 (9.1%)	20 (90.9%)
6	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	2 (25%)	6 (75%)
7	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
8	0 (0%)		0 (0%)		0 (0%)		0 (0%)	
9	0 (0%)		1 (100%)		0 (0%)		1 (100%)	

If you're looking for scientific proof that Climate Change is a hoax, look no further than the way in which these doomsday grifters and profiteers live. This environmental movement is all about The Arrogant using a phony crisis as an excuse to push their Dark Age beliefs on the rest of us.

Others were more generic, simply referencing the notion of ZOG (i.e., Zionist Occupied Government) as a whole. For example, there was a discussion in a thread from a group-affiliated forum about the potential that a related group had been infiltrated by law enforcement. The users' comments referenced ZOG several times to highlight their views of the government:

> 1488fan: woman+man against the evil Z.O.G war-machine. We have never abandoned the idea of leaderless resistance and no-one can call us traitors.
> 88toall: We are all in the movement. I believe that the hammers[skins- a violent far-right group] grew to quick and zog infrated [infiltrated appears to be intended word] easily. I dont know know Hammers but if I did I would fight right beside them and any other white groups.
> Nordic: That's true, they did get infiltrated pretty bad over the years. But so has the Klan, C18, NF, BNP, *insert the name of your favorite group here* – we all have at some point. ZOG sees us as a threat, particularly when we show solidarity.

Though conspiratorial posts were relatively infrequent, there was a statistically significant difference in the presence of conspiratorial posts in those forums tied to a real group relative to those unaffiliated forums (chi-square = 167.331; sig. = .001), with fewer posts in those not affiliated with a specific group (Tau b = −.096; sig = .001).

There were 10% of posts (n = 1,838) including xenophobic language in their posts, as in the following post a user made noting he became a national socialist "at about 14 or 15, watching the way my town was slowly going down hill and immigrant workers forcing my dad out of work and schools teaching liberal leftist subjects." In another thread, a user commented on the perception of the white race's decline in the U.S. writing:

> we'll be the ones on the reservations someday. We're already being chased out of our urban communities by spics and niggers and taught that we must meekly defer to them in society, otherwise they'll get mad at us and have a right to be. Sickeningly, most Whites refuse to see it.

There was a statistically significant difference in the number of posts appearing in group-affiliated forums (chi-square = 24.380; sig = .001), with more posts appearing in those with a group affiliation (Tau b = .037; sig. = .001)

There were, however, a range of posts targeting specific groups with negative comments in keeping with general sentiments from far-extremist groups.[48] Anti-African American sentiment was the most frequently observed, appearing in 12.1% of all posts (n = 2221), followed by anti-Jewish sentiment (6.1%; n = 1024). Anti-LGBTQ (1.5%; n = 270) anti-immigrant (1.7%; n = 344), and anti-Islamic (1.9%; n = 345) and anti-Latino (1.8%; n = 332) were far less common. Anti-Catholic sentiment was observed in only twenty-one total posts (0.1%). The nature of these comments ranged from ethnic slurs as noted above to more elaborate discussions of different groups. Some of these posts appeared in discussions of online gaming, as with the following comment about various video games targeting minorities:

> Try [the video game] race to berlin, it has a German campain [SIC], unfortunaly [SIC] its Germany with no more nazi party as to not offend all the beaners niggers and jews. I don't get that part because beaners and niggers don't have the intelligence to use a computer and the jews aren't even human so it really dosn't [SIC] even matter. F***cking ACLU. I want a run the death camp game like Sims [a video game simulating human lives].

In addition, a thread was made to comment on airstrikes between Israel and Hamas, with posts showing clear distain for both Muslims and Jewish people alike:

> Rahowa!: Its interesting how these foreign volunteer ISIS shitbags are allowed by Western governments to travel to fight in Syria,Iraq etc. If they were going to volunteer to fight Israel, that would be a very different story. They would be jailed before they left the country. Not really mentioned is the large number of kikes from around the world that travel is Israel to partake in it's war crimes. That is deliberately overlooked by Western governments.
>
> BlackFlag: I agree with you but lets see it as a football match, who would you support the muslims or the jews, i would definitely support the muslims so as to crash them later with my team
>
> Whitepride: Ehm no, I would never support muslims, and actually they are in no way worse than jews. The difference is, muslims do everything openly with their terrorists and bombs, while jews are destroying our countries secretly from inside. They both are equally bad and, as I said before, they should just kill each other.

There was a statistically significant difference observed in the presence of these comments between-group affiliated and non-group-affiliated forums for all of these forms with one exception: anti-Catholic sentiment. These comments were more likely to appear in forums associated with a real-world group.

Only 1.71% of all posts (n = 324) involved anti-government sentiments. Anti-governmental comments varied in terms of topic though they were all overwhelmingly negative. For instance, a poster from a general interest forum was making comments regarding the spread of illness as a direct function of illegal immigration and the placement of migrants across the U.S.. He ended his comments stating: "Our government knows exactly WHERE the disease comes from and how it made it's way here!" In a related discussion of illegal immigration from 2014, a user wrote:

> well you have to hand it to our "Home Land Security" [SIC] and the new head Jeh Johnson, he is doing all in his power to start the 2nd Civil War lmao [Laughing My Ass Off]. just a guess but I would say it should begin before the 2016 elections. Congress is doing all they can to secure our Borders also !!!!! lmao.

Other comments more overtly called for political action, as with a user describing mandatory vaccination laws in California as a violation of privacy:

> It seems the citizens of California need to storm the Capitol steps to demand the repeal of this law borne of greed and corruption immediately much the same as the citizens of Texas succeeded in getting Governor Rick Perry to eat crow and apologize publicly for his over-reaching executive order requiring all girls to be vaccinated with Gardasil without exception.

Some comments were more generic, reflecting the notion that the U.S. government was directly lying to the population as a whole. This was exemplified by a post from a user stating: "Government is ALWAYS Lying to you, just like the Devil does, some truth, to make you believe his BIG lie!"

Perhaps surprisingly, only eleven total posts (0.06%) featured comments associated with either anti-tax ideas or sovereign citizen-related concepts. Similarly, survivalist comments were a very small proportion of the total (0.3%; n = 61) as were anti-gun control posts (0.2%; n = 52). In fact, gun control posts appeared primarily in signature lines, with comments such as: "If you want to know what I think of guns, try breaking into my house and find out!" and "The dirty secret, the government wants your firearms!" No significant differences were

observed in the number of posts related to these three sentiments based on the nature of the forum. There was a statistically significant difference in the appearance of these posts between-group affiliated and non-group-affiliated forums (chi-square = 8.213; sig. = .021), with more posts appearing in group-affiliated forums (Tau b = 0.021; sig. = .001).

There was some evidence of individuals stating they participated in events in off-line spaces (1.9%; n = 361). The majority of claims were concentrated in those groups tied to a real-world group (forum 2 = 79 people, forum 3 = 42 people, forum 6 = 21). There was a statistically significant difference in the appearance of these claims between group and non-group affiliated forums (x2 = 32.401***) with fewer claims appearing in non-group-affiliated forums (tau b = − .042***). Some of these comments were generic, suggesting a person was in a group, but not specifically identifying the city or state of its members, as with the following post: "I happen to know a lot about the Hammers[kins] and have experience with them over the last couple of decades – they're not all bad people. I've even had some of them back me & co. up in fights."

A similar number of self-claim posts were observed (1.9%; n = 367). There was a statistically significant difference in the appearance of these claims between group and non-group affiliated forums (chi-square = 55.459; sig. = .001) with more claims appearing in group-affiliated forums (Tau b = 0.55; sig. = .001). Similar to the comments noted above, forum posts could be generic, as with the following quote from an individual indicating their role in national socialist groups stating: "i became ns [National Socialist] at 15. my mentor [name removed] and my mother taught me well.my grandfather was KKK. it runs very deep in my family." Others were more specific as evident in a thread where an individual claimed to be a member of the KKK and wrote:

> No matter what anyone thinks about Adolf Hitler or in what esteem they hold the man, he is NOT YHVH [Yahweh, or the name of god]. As he is not YHVH, we of the United Realms of America Knights of the Ku Klux Klan DO NOT follow him or his politics. This is not to say that he was a terrible man or that he didn't have good intentions, however we believe that only YHVH is to be followed and worshipped!

This post led to quite a bit of outrage, and a poster wrote; "As an officer of the Church of the National Knights of the Ku Klux Klan I most humbly apologize to all members for this retards behaviour."

The majority of users expressed their ideological beliefs via a movement-related signature or image (44.3%; n = 8,481) or a username (44.3%; n = 8,481). These range from the use of 1488 to more specific language such as "RAHOWA NOW." Others used direct quotes from Hitler, such as "A man does not die for something which he himself does not believe in." This is sensible, as an individual's name or avatar (image) is the most immediate way to establish their online identity.[57] Selecting a name that is associated with white identity politics or the ideological agenda of a group enables the user to clearly demonstrate their connection to the broader subculture and movement.[58] Additionally, using a signature line, image or username that evokes ideological sentiments ensures other forum users know your beliefs regardless of the content in your post. Only 9% (n = 1,746) of all posts featured neither an ideological signature nor username, while 27.5% (n = 4,919) of all posts featured both.

Additionally, there was a significant difference in the appearance of signatures or images in a post based on whether a forum is tied to a real-world group (chi-square = 127.622; sig. = .001), with more appearing in group-affiliated forums (Tau b = .085; sig. =

.001). Similarly, ideological usernames were significantly different between forum types ($x2 = 31.958***$), with fewer appearing in non-group-related forums (Tau b = −.042; sig. = .001). In fact, 57.1% of all posts with signatures or image content and 35.5% of all ideological usernames appeared in group-affiliated sites.

Scaling ideological expression by forum posts

To assess the extent to which individuals expressed ideological beliefs within a post, multiple scales were created using the binary measures discussed above. First, a seven-item scale was created to include ideological expression based on the framework provided by Kerodoal and colleagues,[51] including conspiratorial, xenophobic, anti-government, anti-tax, survivalist, anti-gun control, participation in real-world events, and self-claim comments (see Table 3, column 1). The overwhelming majority (83.2%; n = 15,057) of posts involved no ideologically expressive comments, with the second-largest category being one type of comment (14.8%; n = 2,688). An extremely small proportion of posts made two (1.8%; n = 319) or three (0.2%; n = 34) types of comments simultaneously; only seven posts featured four or more ideological comments at the same time. There was no significant difference observed between those forums tied to a real-world group compared to those with no connection (see Table 4, column 1).

When adding in both ideologically expressive usernames and signatures or imagery to this scale, the results change substantially. There was much greater variation in the proportion of posts in this scale: only 4.1% of posts (n = 727) featured no ideological expressions (see Table 3, column 2). Instead, the primary response category was one type of ideological expression (60.4%; n = 10,789) followed by two types (30.7%; n = 5,474). Additionally, three (4.2%; n = 751) and four (0.6%; n = 99) forms were more prevalent, and one post was observed with all nine items. There was a significant difference between the forum types, with a lower scaled response in non-group forums compared to those with a group tie (F = 167.817; m.d. = −.0384; sig. = .001; see Table 4, column 2).

To examine the expression of comments against minority groups, a seven-item additive scale was created by combining the binary measures for anti-LGBTQ, African American, Latino, Immigrants, Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic sentiments (see Table 3, column 3). The findings suggest there was some variation in the extent to which individuals overtly and simultaneously targeted different groups. The majority of posts featured no such comments (78.1%; n = 14,148), or one comment (19.2%; n = 3,473). A small proportion featured comments against two groups (2.3%; n = 411), and an extremely small percentage targeted three groups (0.4%; n = 66). Only one post featured comments against six groups at the same time. There were fewer posts in non-group-affiliated forums compared to those with group ties (F = 2433.556; m.d. = −.2108; sig. = .001; see Table 4, column 3)

Finally, a fourteen item additive scale was created by combining the seven-item scales presented in Table 3 together to reflect the original scale created by Kerodoal and colleagues,[59] and attempts to target specific minority groups (see Table 3, column 4). The majority of content still involved no ideological content in the text (69.6%; n = 12,602), though there was a greater proportion of posts featuring one kind of content than compared to the original scale (20%; n = 3,621). Additionally, there was a substantive increase in those posts featuring two (7.8%; n = 1,409) or three ideological sentiments (1.9%; n = 345). Only one post featured nine ideas simultaneously, and no post featured more than nine expressive

concepts. There were fewer ideological posts in non-group-affiliated forums compared to those with group ties (F = 568.765; m.d. = − .2124; sig. = .001; see Table 4, column 4).

Given the substantial proportion of posts featuring ideologically expressive usernames and signatures or imagery, t-tests were conducted to examine any relationship between these measures and the content of posts. Those posts including both a signature or image and an ideological username were more likely to express ideological sentiments using the first scale, compared to those with either a username or signature or image (m. d. = −.0345; sig. = .001). The same relationship was present regarding sentiments toward minority groups (m.d. = − .0124; sig. = .004), suggesting those posts with more overt associations to a radical movement would involve more ideological content.

Discussion and conclusions

Though terrorism research increasingly considers the role of the Internet and online environments in the promotion and dissemination of radical ideologies, few studies actually attempt to quantify the content of posts expressing ideological beliefs.[60] This study documented the expression of various ideological sentiments in posts made across eight forums over a period of years. The findings demonstrate that participants in far-right extremist forums do not constantly or consistently post messages stressing ideological beliefs. Xenophobic statements were the most common, though they only appeared in 10% of all posts. The preponderance of such comments reflects the negative sentiments held by far-right extremist groups and targeted acts of violence against African American and Jewish populations generally.[61] A very small proportion of all posts included content related to other far-right extremist beliefs, particularly anti-tax, anti-government, and anti-gun control sentiments.

These proportions are lower than what has been identified in prior research,[62] which examined life histories and information collected from open-source searches of individuals who engaged in various ideologically motivated offenses. Thus, the results of this analysis may reflect the unique nature of the online communications of participants. At the same time, the patterns observed were somewhat unexpected as research utilizing forum data emphasizes the overt ideological content posted by participants.[63] Many of these studies utilize convenience samples or target specific word choices, though they may over-emphasize the extent to which ideological beliefs appear. Instead, forum participants use the sites as a platform to discuss specific interests and occasionally express their underlying beliefs. In turn, this may facilitate community building through discussion of seemingly common day-to-day experiences.[64] Similar patterns of use have been observed among gang members' whose Internet activities typically involve discussion, consumption of news, and non-deviant activities.[65] In addition, deviant online communities that are socially marginalized, such as pedophiles, tend to use forums as a means to build social relationships as well as express their specific interests and agendas.[66]

While forum users may not overtly or frequently post ideological language, they were more likely to have ideologically related usernames, signatures, and imagery appear along with their text. Such steps are necessary in online spaces so that users can clearly demonstrate their adherence to, and acceptance of ideological beliefs.[67] The use of evocative usernames and signatures may be an important factor in ideological identity

formation, as it serves as a subtle but persistent reminder of the reasons why individuals are engaged in these communities. Such users were also more likely to express racist and ideological beliefs, which may reflect a greater potential that these individuals may be willing to engage in acts of violence or serve as a source of radical messaging that could influence the behavior of others.[68]

To that end, future research is needed examining the extent to which ideological messaging in forums is shaped by connections to other users. Since forums provide an interactive social experience, it may be that individuals' mutual participation in threads over time with others who are more ideologically expressive may influence their posting behaviors.[69] The use of a longitudinal network analysis strategy combined with ideological analyses of posting behaviors would be critical to understand how user behaviors are shaped by their associations with others online.

Additionally, this study demonstrated that there is partial value in applying off-line typologies such as the Kerodotal et al.[70] scale to quantify and assess ideological expression in online spaces. Generally, there were few posts containing multiple types of ideological expression, and few posts containing overt actions like self-claims of group involvement. As a result, forum content does not demonstrate identity in the same manner as off-line materials or triangulated data as with sources like the ECDB.[71] Modifying the framework to include relevant online markers, such as usernames and signatures may be beneficial to provide a more comprehensive assessment of online means of ideological expression. Similarly, including measures for humor and sarcasm may be beneficial to assess the ways that ideological belief is communicated by actors online.[72] There is also a need for further assessment to examine the extent to which identity-based typologies may be used to account for single-source data, whether from on or off-line sources.

Lastly, this study demonstrated that posts in forums associated with real-world groups, many of which engage in acts of physical violence, were significantly more likely to contain ideological messages overall. On the surface, such an association is sensible given these groups' potential willingness to engage in overt violence and ideological expression. At the same time, several prominent violent actors over the last few years, such as Dyllan Roof, appear to have engaged in unaffiliated far-right forums.[73] Thus, it is not clear what impact the nature of an online space may have on the likelihood an individual either chooses to self-radicalize or engage in action as a function of broader social influences.[74] Additional study is needed with mixed methods, such as analyses of forum data in conjunction with interviews of former extremists and those connected to the movement to assess why and how communications differ between these types of forums.

This study has direct implications for policy and practice related to countering violent extremism in the United States. One current CVE strategy employs targeted messaging campaigns to reach the general population or certain communities, including particular extremist movements.[75] A variety of tools can be used to publicize these messages including speeches, print and TV advertisements, as well as social media and online campaigns.[76] Certain programs explicitly challenge ideological arguments justifying the use of violence,[77] or attempt to demonstrate positive actions by governmental agencies.[78]

While most of these programs target jihadists, some claim the same strategies could effectively target left and right extremists as well.[79] Due to the generally fragmented nature of content expressed in these forums, CVE strategies targeting online communities may be most effective at countering racist and xenophobic messaging due to the preponderance of

content targeting these groups. Research is needed assessing when and how the content of online posts by extremists could be incorporated into CVE messaging campaigns.[80] Additionally, research is needed considering whether such campaigns would be more effective when focusing on specific types of forums, such as unaffiliated sites, or particular online platforms like social media or asynchronous forums.

There are, however, some key limitations that may affect the results of this study. First, these data utilized forums that included content that was not explicitly focused on ideological beliefs, such as computers, gaming, technology, and gendered interests. The extent to which ideological expression appears in more common-place topical conversations has largely been ignored in the broader literature.[81] As a result, future research is needed with larger samples of online data including general interest and specific ideologically focused subtopics to better understand the utility of far-right extremist identity typologies.[82] Additionally, research is needed to assess any differences in ideological expression across topics among diverse far-right extremist group communities online. Such examinations will improve our knowledge of the impact of the Internet on the promotion of far-right extremist ideologies in the twenty-first century.

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